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ABSTRACT

The speech opens with an overview of current conditions in American education. It provides a synopsis of gains in education made in the American South, such as the fact that college enrollment in the region approached national norms. The Secretary of Education describes the changing context of American education and the need for skilled teachers to meet demands dictated by rising enrollments. The importance of fully educating every child, ensuring that students master the basics and that they become proficient in reading and in mathematics. The need to protect children from drugs and violence and the need to teach basic values are highlighted. Strategies for fixing failing schools are outlined, and the Secretary's commitment to public education is highlighted. The gains in connecting schools to the Internet and the importance of connectivity for children's future are described. The teaching force for the 21st century is discussed. The need to support new teachers and to increase teacher retention is also discussed. Partnerships between public schools and higher education is described. The importance of making a college education affordable for all students is emphasized. (RJM)

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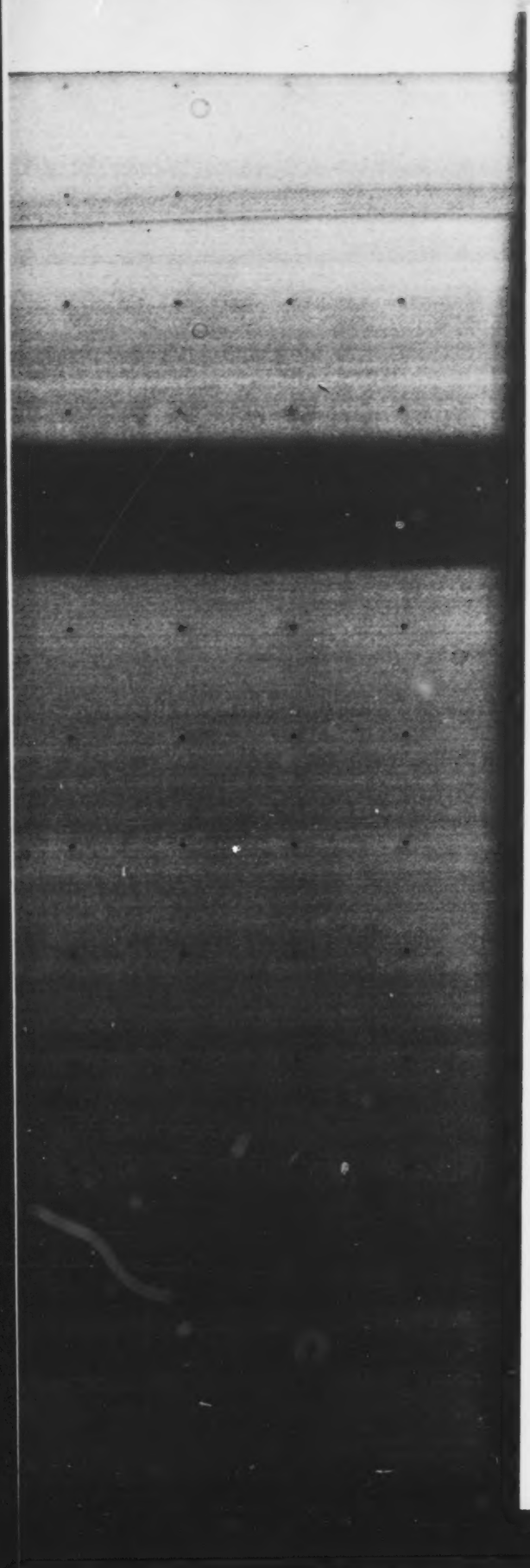

The State of American Education
Fourth Annual Address

Putting Standards of Excellence Into Action

The Carter Center,
Atlanta Georgia

February 18, 1997

President and Mrs. Carter, Senator Cleland, Governor and Mrs. Miller, ladies and gentlemen: I am pleased to be here in Atlanta to give my fourth annual state of American education speech. I begin by extending my thanks to President Carter for his kindness in introducing me, and for his foresight in creating the U.S. Department of Education.

Many years ago, when President Carter created the Department, there was some heated criticism. It was not needed, critics charged, and through the years they never gave up. And, yet today, can anyone really say that advancing education should not be our nation's number one priority?

I tell you, Mr. President, when I go into a Cabinet meeting, I take all the children and college students of America with me. There I see to it that they are represented, that their education is always an issue to be dealt with. Mr. President, on behalf of all these young people, I want to thank you for creating a seat in the President's Cabinet dedicated to advancing American education.

Four years ago, I began this tradition by giving my first speech at Georgetown University, President Clinton's alma mater. Each year since then, I have tried to capture some feature of American education that deserves our attention.

All of these speeches, and the one I intend to give today, are rooted in my belief that we need to stop dumbing down our children, and reach up and set higher expectations. We need to unleash all the brain power stored in the heads of America's young people, and make excellence happen. Our children are smarter than we think. We must give them more responsibility as young children and then expect more of them as they grow and develop.

If ever there was a time to push American education to a higher level, it is now. The sparks are all around us, and many of them have been created by President Clinton, and by so many of you here today and those of you joining us from around the country at the many downlink sites. Keep up your good work; you are making things happen.

Everywhere I go I feel it -- the excitement and the determination of the American people to expect more from our schools and more from their children. This preoccupation with education is as old as America itself. Even before they wrote the Constitution, our Founding Fathers set aside land for the common school. Now, at the edge of the 21st century, the high expectations of the American people can only be achieved if we strive for national standards of excellence and commit ourselves to decisive reform on every front.

This is the purpose of my speech today: to suggest to you how we can put standards of excellence into action to improve American education. And to tell you that we must not drift nor lose time.

The Progress of the South in Setting High Expectations

As we move toward the 21st century, nothing should be more important to us as a nation than the actions we take *now* to help our young people prepare for the future. This is one of the principal reasons why I chose to come to Atlanta to give this speech.

Georgia is an example to the nation. From your emphasis on early childhood to tougher requirements for high school graduation to Hope Scholarships for college, Georgia is a state on the move. I commend you, Governor Miller, for your leadership. Georgia has opened the doors of college to all of its citizens and given young people a reason to buckle down and get smart.

Listen to what a Georgia State freshman told NBC News just two weeks ago: "Without the Hope Scholarship, I wouldn't be going to college because my parents can't afford it."

And one high school freshman said: "I started thinking about the Hope Scholarship when I was in the 6th grade, and I started concentrating on my grades and how I wanted to keep them up."

These are powerful statements. They express hope and something more -- when we give young people something to respond to, they make the connection. They change their expectations and study habits in a fundamental way. This is exactly what President Clinton seeks to achieve in creating a national Hope Scholarship initiative.

Yet we are told by some Washington pundits that this is unwise -- too costly, they say -- and not needed. A few even go on to suggest that too many Americans want to go to college. Well, I know this President. He isn't about to put a ceiling on the dream of any American who wants to work hard to get an education. Every American should have that chance.

Here in the South, we were once stuck in the rut of low expectations. Not any more. We have come a long way in the last 20 years. Many more children are in kindergarten and programs for four-year-olds. Almost 60 percent of high school graduates are now taking the tough academic courses that prepare them for college. This is a four-fold increase since the mid-80s.

College attendance in the South is close to reaching the national level -- another new milestone. And the Southeast, like much of the country, is responding to record breaking enrollments by hiring many more new teachers.

Much of the credit for this progress must go to educators like Mark Musick and the leadership of the Southern Regional Education Board for staying the course to raise standards.

The Changing Context of American Education

This is good progress but we cannot be satisfied. Knowledge is exploding all around us. We live in a new golden age of discovery. Astronomers probe the unfolding majesty of the universe, even as scientists race to map the genetic makeup of humanity. Yet we struggle to put the old industrial model of education behind us.

Never before have our nation's classrooms been so crowded. From Los Angeles to Gwinnett County here in Georgia to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the portable classroom is a common sight in school yards. That is why our President has proposed a $5 billion initiative to jump start school construction.

The entire context of American education is changing. We need teachers skilled in using computers as a powerful teaching tool, and many more teachers well-versed in teaching English as a second language. Our teachers need to teach to a higher level of achievement, and be prepared to teach all of America's children -- the gifted and talented, our many new immigrants, the college-bound achiever, and the disabled child who is learning so much more because he or she is now included.

We have much to do. Achievement scores are not moving up fast enough. Truancy and drop-out rates are still too high. The equity gap in school financing remains a nagging problem in too many states. The jewel of American education is our system of higher education, yet too many families struggle to pay tuition, and too many high school graduates are going to college but not graduating.

Education as a National Priority

Today, more than ever before, education is the engine that drives our economy. Education is now the great fault line that determines who is part of the American Dream. The earnings gap between the educated and the less educated is growing, and it will continue to grow unless we educate all of our young people to high standards. An average education just isn't good enough anymore.

Automobile plants seek new hires who have some college education. America's new entrepreneurs and small business owners are just about desperate to find employees who are motivated, creative and well-educated. The military recruits only high school graduates who score in the upper half of their class in verbal and math skills. And our great institutions of higher learning want freshmen who don't need remedial help.

And here I shall be as strong as I can be. There can be no equality in this nation without a renewed commitment to excellence. Educating every child to use his or her God-given talent is the pre-condition for full equality. One cannot happen without the other.

My friends, we have the attention of the American people. Our country is prosperous and at peace. We have the unique opportunity to do what is best for our children. This should be our great patriotic cause -- our national mission -- giving all of our children a world-class education by putting standards of excellence into action.

The President's Call to Action

President Clinton, in his State of the Union speech, gave us a bold vision of what American education can become. From helping our children to master the basics, to better teaching and modernizing our schools, to helping families pay for college through

increased Pell Grants and Hope Scholarships, the President has made excellence in education our national mission.

The President's 10-point "Call to Action" is a bold approach that is national in scope, yet local in action because that's the American way. This is leadership at its best. I am pleased that the Congress has joined President Clinton in a bipartisan commitment to make sure that politics stops at the schoolhouse door. As I have said before, we don't educate our children as Democrats or Republicans. We educate them as Americans.

This is what the American people want and expect of us. I urge Congress to pass the President's education agenda and to recognize the important contributions that it can make this year to advancing American education.

This year, the Congress will have to reauthorize many major pieces of legislation: Voc ed, Adult ed, Voc rehab and the IDEA bill that insures the education of 5.4 million disabled children. And I am pleased by the open dialogue I have had with the higher education community as we prepare to reauthorize the Higher Education Act.

But we have much more to do. We are rushing headlong toward the 21st century, yet too many of our young people are falling by the wayside. I want to be very clear. It's not enough to have high expectations or set challenging standards. We must put standards of excellence into action. This is my agenda.

Our young people must master the basics once and for all. Our schools need to rethink and shake up our current approach to drug prevention. Fixing failing schools must become our first order of business, not our last. Our children need to be part of the Information Age sooner rather than later, to get connected to the world of technology as it unfolds around them.

We must make sweeping changes in how we prepare America's teachers. Public schools and higher education must develop a fundamentally new relationship -- a new partnership to prepare young people for college-level work. And, we need a smart tax policy for the 21st century to support life-long learning for all Americans.

First: we must master the basics once and for all. Forty percent of our children are not reading as well as they should by the end of the third grade. And this nation is below the international average when it comes to eighth grade math.

That's just not good enough in my book. All of our research tells us that reading well by the fourth grade and having good math skills -- including algebra and some geometry -- by the eighth grade are critical turning points in the education of our young people.

The President has called for challenging, voluntary national tests in fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math. We have a President who has the courage to fight for our children's education, respecting the state and local role but challenging our schools and communities to get on with it.

Reading is reading. Math is math. For these basics, let's not cloud our children's future with silly arguments about federal government intrusion. These proposed tests are an opportunity not a requirement, a national challenge not a national curriculum.

The President and I are firmly opposed to any form of national curriculum. And we have done all we can to cut red tape and cut people loose. In the last four years, we have eliminated about half of all federal regulations for elementary and secondary education, while never losing sight of our constitutional obligations.

I encourage every state and school district to accept the challenge by the President to participate in these voluntary national tests. Yes, there may be a high failure rate in the beginning. But in time, we will have a high success rate as well -- if all Americans see themselves as part of the solution.

The President's effort to support the work of one million volunteer tutors through the ***America Reads Challenge*** is a clear message that the solutions must come from the American people. I am pleased to announce that a broad spectrum of religious denominations here in Atlanta will spearhead a drive to support the President's reading challenge.

Led by the Georgia Baptist Literacy Mission, the Atlanta Board of Rabbis, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church, Atlanta's faith communities are going to make sure every child in Atlanta is reading a book. And, in the weeks ahead, I will work with religious leaders from across the country to rally tens of thousands of volunteers to this national effort.

If reading well is the first basic, we also know that math is the gateway to learning many more advanced skills. In the last decade, we have made substantial progress in improving math and science education.

But we need to notch up our standards even higher. Only 20 percent of our young people are taking algebra by the end of the eighth grade. In the rest of the advanced world, the vast majority of -- if not all -- students have studied algebra by the end of the eighth grade. I believe our students should do the same.

Protecting Our Children from Drugs and Violence

The next point I want to emphasize -- and this is critical -- is that achievement can occur only if we have schools that are safe and drug free. An unsafe school is a failing

school. Children cannot learn if they are surrounded by drugs and violence. Today, we are confronted by the fact that eighth-grade drug use is up for the fifth year in a row.

Here I want to speak directly to baby boomers who are now parents. Some of you have tried it all, and now you know better. Don't send your children a mixed message when it comes to drugs, alcohol and smoking.

A child in second or third grade is perfectly capable of getting the message that drugs, alcohol and smoking are bad for them. Children are starting to make bad choices by the fifth and sixth grade, and by middle school too many of our young people are taking risks and experimenting with drugs.

And to the children of America -- don't kill off your brain cells -- don't mess up your lives -- when there is so much hope and possibility around you.

To give our young people that hope, our schools must do a better job of making our classrooms drug free. There is an enormous variation in the effectiveness of our drug prevention programs, and this concerns me for good reason. We have 10 years of rising enrollments ahead of us. We must place a much stronger focus on creating stable, comprehensive drug prevention programs with determined leadership.

We know a lot about what works when it comes to drug prevention, programs like Project Alert and Life Skills. We also know that these proven models are not being used as much as they should. Too often our schools -- with the best of intentions -- are flying by the seat of their pants when it comes to drug prevention. Using proven, tested, research-based drug prevention programs must become a top priority.

I ask every school board, superintendent, principal and PTA to mount a vigorous

review this year of existing drug prevention programs to see if they can pass muster. General Barry McCaffrey is the President's effective leader in the fight against drugs; he and I will work with you. For my part, I promise the same vigorous review of our federal Safe and Drug Free Schools Program.

As always, we remain faithful to the core idea that our schools are where we teach our young people basic American values. Our commitment to this core idea has taken many forms: protecting the religious liberty of students by issuing historic guidelines, supporting strong character education efforts, and placing a very strong emphasis on family involvement.

For too long, parents have been the missing link in our efforts to improve our schools. Experts talk to experts, and conference after conference is held about new models of education reform. I urge a different approach: Start with parents. The moral child and the achieving student are just about always connected to an involved parent.

Parents who set high expectations, even a parent with a limited formal education, is a powerful force for excellence. Ultimately, the character of American education is going to be defined by the character and commitment of involved parents and other caring adults.

First Order of Business: Fix Failing Schools

My next point is that we cannot and must not tolerate failing schools. To meet the new expectations of the American people, we must confront the all-too-common problem of schools that are low-achieving and even dangerous. In America today, there are schools that should not be called schools at all. These schools have done just about everything they could to kill the sense of wonder in their students. And then we wonder why truancy increases and young people drop out.

Our willingness to abide these schools goes to the heart of my concern about low expectations. Too often, we fall into the trap of thinking that the children who are stuck in failing schools are the problem. We accept the easy way out, the false assumption that they cannot learn because they are the wrong color, from the wrong side of the tracks, or because they speak the wrong language.

Yet, we all know from first-hand experience that there are good public schools, good parochial schools and private schools in every inner city in this country that are islands of excellence. Dick Elmore, a Harvard researcher in the field of education, has often made this point to me: in every city that he has visited, he has found three of the best schools in the country and three schools that are just about the sorriest.

I think Dick has it about right and that is what troubles me. We need to stop making excuses and get on with the business of fixing our schools. If a school is bad and can't be changed, reconstitute it or close it down. If a principal is slow to get the message, find strength in a new leader. If teachers are burned out, counsel them to improve and then, if necessary, offer them a fair process to leave the profession. If laws needs to be changed, get on with it.

This is not an impossible task. The efforts of Rick Mills and Rudy Crew in New York, Paul Vallas in Chicago, Gerry House in Memphis, and Bill Rojas in San Francisco are all examples of putting aside the business as usual attitude.

Fundamental change is hard. Some of you may read the cartoon Dilbert -- Dilbert is sort of a befuddled technocrat of the 1990s. My wife Tunky and I were visiting the zoo one day when we saw a teenager with a Dilbert T-shirt that read: "Change is good -- you go first."

Well, those of us who believe in excellence for all children need to take the risk of going first. When people tell me that public schools can't excel, I tell them that they haven't worked hard enough to get the job done.

I also tell them not to be fooled by those who want to use public tax dollars for vouchers to help a few students get out of a troubled school. If a boat is sinking because of a hole, you fix the hole right away. You don't let it keep sinking and then throw out a lifeline so that a few can survive.

The strength of our diverse democracy is the direct result of our belief in a quality public education for all. This is why I will not yield to those who want to abandon public schools. We need to build up public education, not tear it down.

Do we need many more models of how we can fix troubled schools? Yes, of course we do and fortunately, help is readily available. Dedicated educators like James Comer, Henry Levin, E.D.Hirsch, Deborah Maier, Ted Sizer, Marc Tucker and Gene Bottoms are doing the hard work of creating new models of excellence. The models are each unique in their own way. But they all have one common denominator: they all set high standards.

The New American Schools Development Corporation is another powerful example of how change can take place. It has developed seven different, well-conceived models of how to fix a failing school. Local parents and school leaders choose the right model that fits their community. That's public school choice at its best. A community may want to choose its own approach to fixing a failing school, or choose any of these models of excellence, or start a charter school.

But make the effort, that is the point. Superintendent Ben Canada here in Atlanta is making that effort right now. He is reconstituting low-achieving schools and starting them on

the road to excellence -- the A.T. Walden Middle School is one of them.

And here I want to stress an important factor. There is federal funding available through our Title I program, Goals 2000, and our new Charter School program that can be used to fix a failing school or launch a new one. More than 100 schools now working with Robert Slavin and the New American Schools Development Corporation are using federal funds to achieve excellence. I urge school officials to follow the example of these schools. Don't use the lack of funding as an excuse to allow failure to continue.

Connecting to the Information Age

The next issue on my action agenda deals with a very important subject: technology in education. We simply can't leave any child behind in this Information Age. This spring the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is scheduled to pass the E-rate or education rate. Final approval by the FCC will cut access charges to the Internet in half for the vast majority of our schools. Use of the Internet for our poorest schools will be almost free. This is a very big decision for American education, and it needs to happen.

The Internet is the blackboard of the future and our young people get into it. Today, 65 percent of our schools are linked to the Internet, but only 14 percent of our classrooms are connected. This is why the E-rate is so important, and why it has the strong support of the President, Vice President Gore and educators all across this country.

This proposal should not be held up by any unnecessary delays. Let's not put our children's future on hold. I urge the FCC, state regulators and telecommunications leaders to step up for our children and make the E-rate a reality this year.

A Teaching Force for the 21st Century

Now, I want to talk to you about teaching. I urge sustained attention to the task of preparing America's future teachers. Improving American education happens classroom by classroom. There is no other way to get it done. And as a nation, we have a great task in front of us. In the next 10 years, we need to recruit two million teachers to replace a generation of teachers who are about to retire, and to keep up with rising enrollments.

But we are not as prepared as we should be for this enormous undertaking and there are several reasons why. We do not, for example, do a very good job of recruiting people to this demanding profession, and we have really failed to do justice to the task of recruiting talented minority candidates and males.

Another reason: our colleges of education and departments of education are too often treated like forgotten stepchildren in our system of higher education. And when eager new teachers enter the classroom for the first time, we give them little, if any, help. As a result of this longstanding sink-or-swim approach, we are losing 30 percent of our new teachers in the first three years. In addition, 25 percent of our nation's current teachers are now teaching out of their field.

These are astonishing figures that will only grow as schools rely on hard-working substitute teachers to stem the tide of crowded classrooms. We will never have "A" students if we can only give ourselves a "C" as a nation when it comes to preparing tomorrow's teachers. We cannot lower our standards -- as we have in the past - to meet the growing demand for new teachers.

Now is the time to get it right -- to step back and rethink how we recruit, prepare, and support America's teachers. The recent report of the National Commission on Teach-

ing and America's Future, chaired by Governor Jim Hunt, is a valuable road map to changing the status quo.

New teachers -- like new lawyers and new doctors -- should have to prove that they are qualified to meet high standards before getting a license. This would mean that prospective teachers are able to pass a rigorous, performance-based assessment of what they know and what they are able to do. And, once a new teacher is in a classroom he or she should be linked to master teachers during their first few years of teaching

Those who prepare America's teachers must rise to the demand for better teaching, and expect to be held accountable for the success of their students in achieving certification. Stronger public accountability will help, both in identifying where strengths and weaknesses lie and where special attention needs to be focused.

I encourage college and university leaders to strengthen links between your schools of liberal arts and schools of education. See this as an important part of your mission. Greater attention needs to be paid to the content of what future teachers need to know in their subject area. Rigorous pre-med and pre-engineering science courses are the accepted norm. The same cannot be said for the courses being taken by students who look forward to careers in teaching.

Teaching is a demanding profession, and it will be even more demanding in the future. The President and I strongly support the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and its goal of certifying over 100,000 master teachers in the next decade. I challenge every school in the nation to have at least one board-certified teacher on the faculty.

We can't adopt a hit-or-miss approach to improving teacher quality. We have to keep at it year in and year out. Therefore, I will

issue a biennial report on teacher quality beginning next year. Just as we expect a great deal from our students, we have an obligation to expect a great deal of ourselves in supporting America's teachers. David Haselkorn, the head of Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., may have said it best: "Teaching is the profession that makes all other professions possible." As secretary of education, I want to say thank you to America's teachers who are dedicating their lives to America's children day after day. It's very hard work and I thank you for your effort.

A New Partnership Between Public Schools and Higher Education

This leads me to my next proposal. For too long public education in America and higher education have gone their separate ways, each dedicated to its own vision of excellence and learning. This 19th-century model is outdated.

We need a new model appropriate for the 21st century, an ongoing dialogue at every level of education to raise expectations and achieve high standards.

Many young people, for example, are defining their expectations about whether to go to college as early as eighth grade. How do we capture the attention of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old and get them on the path that prepares them for college-level work? Surely this is a shared interest.

And, we must spread the word that there are many ways to achieve excellence: Advanced Placement, School-to-Work, International Baccalaureate, and Tech-Prep. Our colleges and universities should not always be in the remedial education business.

I will hold a national forum this spring, bringing together the nation's best teachers, public education leaders, and members of

the higher education community. This forum will explore how we can recruit the next generation of teachers, and do a better job of preparing teachers for the challenges of the classroom.

Making Expectations a Reality: Financing a College Education

Where do I think that all of this focus on standards and new expectations will lead our nation? It will lead more of our young people to aspire to learn more, and to carry their education further. That means access to college -- my final point -- whether it is a community college, a state college or a private institution of learning.

The President and I are deeply committed to ensuring access to higher education for every student who works hard to make the grade. This commitment has taken many forms: the creation of streamlined direct lending program and the biggest increase in Pell Grants since its inception as well as grants for more students and a growing work study program with a new emphasis on community service.

This commitment is also why the President is following Georgia's lead in proposing his own Hope Scholarship program. Georgia's Hope Scholarship pays tuition and fees for qualified Georgia high school graduates who attend a college or university in the state. This is a big idea.

The result: 97 percent of the freshman class at the University of Georgia attend on a Hope Scholarship. All Americans -- whether they live in Atlanta, Houston or Seattle -- should have the similar chance to earn a college education.

Under the President's plan working and middle-income students of all ages can receive a tax credit of up to $1,500 for the first two years of college. That amount covers tuition at the typical community college. This plan will go a long way to making the first

two years of college universally available. Universal -- another big idea.

In addition, middle income Americans have the option to deduct up to $10,000 off of their income taxes for college tuition throughout their lifetime.

Now, some have said the President's plan is not needed. I disagree. When it comes to trying to afford the costs of college, many middle-income families are, in practical terms, barely holding on, and many do not even consider college an option.

Let me suggest why: For families with incomes of $22,000 to $67,000, the percentage of students who earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 has held steady at around 20 percent since 1980. But for families with incomes above $67,000, the percentage of students who earn a bachelor's degree has shot up during that same period -- from less than 50 to about 80 percent.

That gap is unacceptable. Much of America's working and middle class has been shut out. We need to close that gap and fundamentally change the expectations of many Americans who have never even considered college a possibility.

All Americans -- poor, working and middle income -- deserve the opportunity to go to college. Our economy will continue to prosper in this Information Age only if more Americans can afford to go to college, not fewer.

I point to history for an instructive lesson. For most of the Industrial Age, we used the tax code to encourage business to invest in plants and equipment. For the Information Age, we should provide tax incentives that encourage our people to invest in themselves by getting a college education. The Hope Scholarship, the tuition tax deduction, and the penalty-free IRA withdrawals --when considered as part of an overall student aid plan--represent smart tax policies for the 21st century.

Conclusion:
A Nation on the Move

I end now where I began by asking you to recognize the new possibilities, the new excitement and the rising expectations of the American people. The American people are tuned into education. The sparks are all around us. And we have a President in the White House -- in Bill Clinton -- who cares deeply about education. If ever there was a time to come together for the good of our children it is now.

America is on the move, and every school, college and university can be a bastion of hope, creativity and learning. For education is much more than getting a degree or learning a new skill. There is joy to learning, and the freedom of the intellect that brings with it new discovery and new thinking.

Thomas Jefferson, America's first great educator, told us many years ago: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Good citizenship, then, has it roots in education. And as my late father often told me -- there is no greater honor in America than that of being called a good citizen.

We are, my friends, at the door to a new time. And, in this new era, we will not build with bricks and mortar. We will build with minds -- with the power of knowledge -- and with the talent of every well educated American who is eager to participate in our free enterprise system and strengthen our democracy.

The year is 1997. The issue is education. The question is: will we meet the challenge? I believe we can. This is what is at stake for our children. That is what is at stake for America.

Thank you.

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